



Backpack Buddies back for another year

Galax volunteers are beginning their third year of helping kids in need by providing healthy snacks each week.

By April Wright, Reporter

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Cindy Huff (left) and Lori Hennis (right) are two of the faithful volunteers of Backpack Buddies who pack backpacks each Friday.

Faith, a supportive community and compassionate volunteers have led Backpack Buddies into its third year in Galax.

"We're still here," said organizer Jacquie Roberts. "The community has rallied behind the program. And our donors have been wonderful."

Backpack Buddies is a national community-based program with about 150 organizations in the U.S., designed to provide nutritious non-perishable meals and healthy snacks to children in need.

Working from donations, grants, local grocers Kroger and Horton's and Salem-based food bank Feeding America, Backpack Buddies is serving 176 students at Galax schools.

When the program started three years ago, about 65 elementary students signed up. Since then, the program has spread to the middle and high schools.

Roberts and friends Alison Bolen and Stephanie Dees came together to start up the program to help feed every hungry child in the community.

Each Friday, a group of faithful volunteers gather at Warrick Hall at Galax Presbyterian Church, say a prayer, create an assembly line and fill each backpack with soups, crackers, snacks and juices to carry students through the weekend. Students return the backpacks to school on Monday, and the process starts over.

"We have people that come every week," said Bolen. "It's been such a blessing that these people are giving their time and energy, and there's no way we could do it without their support."

Throughout the year, teachers make referrals of students they feel would benefit from the program.

"It's really been a community effort," said Roberts. "We've trusted in our faith, just as this program was founded on."

The word has even spread beyond the Galax community.

One woman in South Carolina, whose daughter Karen Simpson lives in the area, knitted and donated 200 hats for Backpack Buddies children. And she is already working on a batch for next year.

"We're getting donations from different parts of the state, and it's cool to see that," said Roberts. "And we're very fortunate to have those kinds of donations, especially in these economic times."

With Galax the first community in the Twin County area to start up the new program and others in the counties have followed, Bolen said she hopes other localities and schools come on board.

"When you see these kids with their backpacks, you can see the excitement and gratitude on their faces," said Roberts. "And they realize that people in the community love them."

• To volunteer, backpacks are filled every Friday from 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. at Galax Presbyterian Church's Warrick Hall. To make a donation, make checks payable to Galax Presbyterian Church, c/o Backpack Buddies Program. Mail checks to: Galax Presbyterian Church, Attn: Backpack Buddies, P.O. Box 2, Galax, VA 24333.